SWIMMING TO SLEEP

by Randi Triant

I became an insomniac on October 18, 1986, the day my oldest brother, Philip, drowned in a boating accident. He was two weeks shy of his thirty-fifth birthday.

I was twenty-nine, living in Boston, three hundred and fifty miles away from where he lived near Ithaca, New York. Recently divorced, I spent much of my time club hopping on Lansdowne Street adjacent to Fenway ballpark. Within ten minutes of hearing about my brother's death, I popped a Valium. I remember sitting on an early-morning airplane with my Ray-Bans on and then the rest of that week is not available, like a cardboard box that can't be found in a crowded basement archive. It's there somewhere, but it's buried and to get at it would require an enormous amount of effort.

When I returned to Boston after the funeral, I resumed my

Photo by Mary Shannon Johnstone

routine of working at a public-health research firm and club hopping every weekend. Except one thing was noticeably off: I wasn't sleeping. Before my brother's death, I'd slept easily: a deep, blissful eight hours every night during the week and on the weekends I'd rarely awaken before noon. But since the accident, I'd become a terrible insomniac. I'd fall asleep quickly, giving the appearance that all was well, but then, around midnight, I'd wake up with a start as if I were bursting my way through to the surface of a dark, oppressive place. By the time I'd lurch awake, my clattering heart would prevent me from falling back to sleep for a good four hours. I began to find excuses not to go to bed: a book could be read, *Casablanca* was on after the late-night news. Anything to avoid that black hole.

And then, nine months later, something else surfaced: I stopped going in the water. I'd spent my childhood swimming in the Atlantic Ocean; as an adult, I wouldn't have thought of living anywhere but near an ocean. But now that all changed. It started with my turning down an invitation to go out on a friend's boat. By summer's end, I'd begun to develop a disturbing reaction to being in water that years later was as automatic as goose bumps—as soon as I got in up to my waist, horrible images careened in and out, illustrating in detail what I imagined Philip went though every second of his drowning. One image in particular haunted me: Philip's left elbow, previously shattered during a disastrous slide into home plate, had been surgically pinned and screwed into a weird, permanently bent angle, and this elbow became, for me, his albatross during the accident. I imagined that arm throwing his stroke off, flailing at the water, and then tiring out completely, eventually forcing him to swim with just his one good arm while his damaged limb trailed in the water like a broken wing. Inevitably, I'd turn around and walk back onto the safer sand.

Growing up, Philip had been the one, I'd been convinced, who had hung the moon every night. He was tall and lanky, like a basketball star, though he never was one. Towheaded, his light hair set him apart from our other brother, Rick, and me; both of us were short and brown-haired, resembling twins though we were three years apart. Philip, five and a half years older than me, had taught me everything I'd needed for a sixties childhood in suburbia: how to throw a baseball, how to ride the waves at Jones Beach, how never to use the fact that I was a girl as an excuse. I was his constant companion.

Philip had died trying to save everyone else who had been on a capsized motorboat. And while that could be considered something to be proud of, heroic even, when it came down to it, I felt the opposite, the unspeakable: I would have preferred that he'd been a coward, that he'd saved himself. I would have preferred that he'd still been alive, that I would've still been able to sleep through the night and dive into a line of curling waves without any thought of its undertow.

By the first anniversary of Philip's death, I was afraid of water and of going to sleep. What's more, I would remain that way for sixteen years. Maybe it was the sheer sleep deprivation. Maybe I was simply too tired to do anything about either my mind-numbing insomnia or my fear of water. I took Philip's death hard, as we always do with the first real death in our lives. Insomnia, I reasoned, was just part of the grieving process. More than likely, though, I didn't do a thing about my sleeplessness or my fear of swimming for sixteen years because the thought of taking on the excavating I would need to do to understand the *why* of it all was too daunting a task. It would've been like revisiting the scene of a crime where you had been attacked, and reliving it all again.

FINALLY, I'D HAD ENOUGH. On a rainy night in April, at the age of forty-five, I arrived at the local YMCA for my first beginner swim class. Inside, a screaming squall of five-year-olds, leftovers from the Advanced Pike class, shattered the sound barrier. Their mothers wrapped them in large bath towels as if they were making burritos out of them, and then quickly herded them out of the pool area into the neighboring locker room.

The five of us who had signed up for the adult beginners' class stared blankly at each other. Our instructor, Alex, looked like someone you'd see in a commercial selling yogurt. She told the five of us taking the course to ease into the water so that we could feel more comfortable. It was as if she were asking us to put on lingerie.

I slipped into the water before I could stop myself.

"You're so courageous," a friend had told me on the phone after I'd confided in her about signing up for the Y class. I didn't see it that way. I know courage when I see it and that's not it. In truth I was what those five-year-olds at the Y would call a fraidy cat—I simply wanted the nightmarish images of my brother's death to stop. I wanted to sleep.

Standing on the worn, tiled lip near the pool's edge, Alex began her instruction. "Let's just go around and say what our goals are for taking this class."

Brett wore racing goggles gripping his head. He informed us that he was there to build up his endurance in preparation for a triathlon. Some of us exchanged worried glances—it seemed we'd mistakenly joined the wrong class.

"You know this is beginners, right?" Alex asked him and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Jim, the other male in the class, turned out to have already taken Alex's class but he wasn't willing yet to move on to intermediate. Before any of us could think of blaming Alex's teaching ability, however, she quickly told us, "Jim *should* be in the intermediate class regardless of what he tells you."

Finally, there were Fran and Betty, two older women around retirement age who had trouble treading water in the kiddie end of the pool. Later on they'd hold on tightly to the floaty dumbbells, comprised of a long plastic tube with two Styrofoam "weights" on the ends. Their hands would grip the dumbbell bars with white knuckles. Looking at Fran and Betty, I felt a tug of sadness and relief. It was as if I was looking at my future and I was suddenly very conscious of how I could change it. When Alex had asked me why I was taking the class, I'd simply told her and the group that having grown up near the ocean I'd never really learned how to swim correctly. It was

the truth but a lie too. I didn't mention Philip or anything about my insomnia or my fear of water. Looking at Fran and Betty, I wondered if that was a big mistake. If they could show their insecurities and fears, why couldn't I?

HOW YOU DROWN, it turns out, is all about *where* you drown. It makes a difference whether you're in the ocean or fresh water. That's what Sherwin B. Nuland says in *How We Die*, a book that takes the mystery out of dying. But reading it, I'd felt the same letdown as when I'd watched a TV show in which a famous magician revealed the secrets behind his complicated tricks. These are secrets that you think you want to know, but when it comes down to it, you really don't.

According to Nuland, because my brother drowned in a reservoir of fresh water in the Adirondacks he had the opposite physical reaction than say, all the people on the *Titanic* did when they went down in the Atlantic. In fresh water, the lungs *pull* the water into our body's circulatory system. Our blood is then quickly diluted, which, in turn, wreaks havoc and destruction on our red blood cells. In response, the body automatically sends large amounts of potassium into our circulation. Unfortunately, potassium is a sort of self-euthanasia. It spells big trouble and screws with our heart muscles—and what doctors call fibrillation begins. The heart's ventricles start to twitch in an uncoordinated way and eventually stop altogether.

If you drown in seawater, the reverse happens. A drowning person there experiences water *leaving* the circulatory system and then entering the alveoli of the lungs. The person essentially suffocates in water, or what's called pulmonary edema. Drowning in swimming pools is more like drowning in the sea because the chlorine chemically destroys the lung tissue.

Of course these clinical descriptions of what happened to my brother fail to capture what really took place that cold October morning. It's like reading a newspaper account of a war; we get the death toll but not the fight. The blood and sweat are missing. The emotional core is absent.

"By and large, dying is a messy business," Nuland says. And so it is. My brother did not go down easily. He was on a hunting trip with five other men and the accident was the result of a fatal combination: poor planning, too much weight, and cold water. It was October, dawn. They simply wanted to hunt for deer on the other side of the misnomered Stillwater Reservoir in Stillwater, New York. Four of them planned to take the thirteen-foot fiberglass boat across; two were supposed to walk around. At the last second, the two hopped on, and that was that. By the time they were about three hundred yards out, the heavy weight of six men loaded down with guns and ammunition became too much for the small boat made to only carry four people. It'd already begun to take on water. Fast. Before they knew it, they were in the cold water, the boat overturned. The life jackets were locked in a cabin that was now submerged upside down. My brother dove under to try to get them out while panicking men scrambled over more panicking men for something to grip onto on top of the upturned boat's bottom. Philip resurfaced, empty-handed, breathing hard. No luck. There wasn't enough room on the floating boat for all of them. My brother yelled that he'd swim for help. Another man, his friend Jeff, went with him.

What did my brother think in those minutes when he swam toward the faraway shore, his thick clothing dragging him down, the forty-eight-degree water beginning the hypothermic process that would be his undoing? I've often thought about that. Whether he knew this was it. Whether he thought of his daughter and two sons. About the rest of us. Or something more human, like I'm gonna kill that sunovabitch for locking up the life vests. That's what I think about. Probably, though, Philip thought only of getting to shore. There wasn't enough time to doubt that he wouldn't make it.

But he didn't. Somehow in the early-morning darkness, his friend Jeff separated from him. Jeff knew something Philip didn't. When *his* arms got tired, Jeff went on his back. He floated his way to the bank. He ran for help. The four men left clinging to the boat were saved by holding onto the boat like a buoy and swimming for shore.

State police divers eventually found Philip, but not for hours later. Not until three o'clock in the afternoon. Meanwhile, our brother, Rick, arrived and stood on the shoreline, waiting for the worst possible news. The wait was excruciating. I know courage when I see it and this was the real deal. Philip was eventually found in fifteen feet of water, less than one hundred and fifty yards from the north shore. Rick was the one who had to make the phone call to our parents. Imagine, if you will, that call.

Then imagine it a second time when he had to call me. When I picked up the receiver, he asked me if I was alone. He didn't want me to be.

Dying *is* a messy business. It leaves behind people, people who spend their lives trying to figure out questions: *When? How? Why?* These are the questions we ask ourselves at two in the morning when we're up and about, padding around the rooms of our rabbit-warren apartments, afraid to go back to bed where we may imagine the answers, especially the *how*. We're left behind, taking beginner swim classes with triathletes who compete in races to prove how strong they are. They haven't a clue that when you're fighting for your life, it's not about strength at all. It's about choices. About staying on shore or jumping aboard. About doing the front crawl or going on your back. Death leaves us behind, ridiculously grateful when our own fingertips safely touch the tiled wall of a YMCA pool. It leaves us behind to learn how to swim again.

ALEX'S ASSIGNMENTS during that first lesson ranged from the mundane to the challenging. She had us prove we could swim underwater. She had us swim from one side of the pool to the other, holding on to the dumbbells with alternating hands. She kept us busy.

"I want to see how you use your legs to kick," Alex said. She told us kicking is the most important part of swimming. Whenever she gave us one of these swimmer tidbits, I thought briefly of Philip, wondering if he didn't kick right, or maybe his hips weren't wiggling in the way that Alex told us they should.

"If you're doing it right, it should hurt," she informed us.

Toward the end of the class, I was so busy trying to master the complexity of managing the dumbbell with alternating hands while my free arm was stroking the water and my face was either in the water or coming up for air that I forgot to be scared. One time I got it all wrong and I ended up batting myself in the head with a Styrofoam weight, which made me laugh so hard that I took in a capful of chlorine. It didn't stop me, though. Alex shouted out to keep going and that's what I did. *I kept going.* I didn't think about Philip or how any of the survivors could live with themselves or the fact that I'd been in the water for forty minutes straight and not one gruesome image had flickered across my mind.

I just kept swimming.

LESSON NUMBER TWO and Alex was nowhere in sight. Instead, a swarthy young guy named Michael told us that Alex wasn't feeling well and he'd be teaching the class. I had my doubts about Michael. He looked like the type to yell "Cannonball!" at a beer-blast pool party. Brett the triathlete was a no-show, as was Betty. A new woman, Susan, who was young and very agreeable, showed up. The class felt like a drop-in group for would-be swimmers.

"Okay, let's see you go the full length of the pool holding on to one of these kickboards, just using your legs," Michael said. "Remember it should all come from your quads. It should feel like a slow burn."

I was beginning to think that all swim instructors liked these sexual innuendoes. But it turned out that Michael was actually a wonderful instructor. He was as different from Alex as water ballet is from water polo. For one thing, he stayed in the water with us the entire lesson. Alex stood on the tiled floor and shouted instructions *down* to us.

Michael was a big Breath Guy—he had Susan and me stand in one spot, bent at our waists with our faces in the water, practicing our breathing. "You two swing too much," he told us. Swinging is when you overcompensate to get a breath and while lifting your chin completely off the water (a no-no), ratchet your head back over your shoulder. "You need to keep your chin touching the water," he said. "Your mouth should be opening for air under the curve of your arm." The way he said it made it seem like the body was built specifically for swimming. He seemed excited whenever any of us made a tiny improvement in our technique. "Almost, almost," his voice echoed and boomed in that indoor-pool way. "You almost had it that time." I stopped thinking of my breath as something that would give out; instead it became something to *take in.*

After that lesson I woke up not at my usual midnight, but at five o'clock in the morning. It wasn't exactly sleeping in, but it was the first time in a very long time that I could say I slept through the night. But even though I seemed to have achieved something, I didn't for a minute believe that I wouldn't have another night of sleeplessness. If nothing else, my brother's death had made me a hard-core realist. Maybe I'd slept well because I was so tired from class. Or maybe something deeper *had* occurred inside of me, like when the earth shifts its tectonic plates. I didn't know.

"You're guardedly optimistic," someone once told me. He wasn't talking about the swimming lessons and my insomnia, but he could've been.

IT WASN'T SURPRISING that I'd had difficulty—to put it mildly—sleeping since my brother died. Think of the ancient Greeks who believed that the god of sleep, Hypnos, was the brother of death. Shakespeare had called sleep "death's counterfeit." Not exactly someone you'd want to lie down with, is it?

Modern medicine argues that people who experience chronic sleeplessness can usually count on one of two things being awry. Either they have something wrong physically that causes them to wake up, like sleep apnea where you stop breathing every once in a while, or something is plaguing them psychologically. It's not rocket science and yet one out of every three people has trouble sleeping.

Insomnia, as any sufferer will tell you, quickly turns the sweetest, most pleasant person into an irritable bitch. You're restless, you can't focus. You begin to easily identify (and envy) those who sleep well by their dewy eyes and rosy skin. Envy is the death knell for friendship. The things we envy our friends for are numerous. They close their eyes, they fall asleep, and they *stay that way* for eight hours. They tell funny stories about skiing at Mad River Glen. They see their brothers every Christmas. *All* of their brothers.

Often when I'd wake up in the middle of the night, I'd feel as if I'd just been with my brothers. For what, after all, acts as the rudder for our sleep more than our memories? Our childhood had been spent on Jones Beach, at field six—the family beach. We'd spent hours in the ocean, bodysurfing, riding the waves all the way into shore, not giving a moment's thought to what would happen if we went under. Yet inevitably, we did get pulled under—hard. The undertow at Jones could be difficult for any adult to struggle against, let alone a child. Start too early on the wave and we'd miss it altogether. Start too late and the push and pull of the crashing curl would throw us down and sideways, the salt water cloudy and swirling as we tried to decipher which way was up. We'd pull each other out, safe onto the wet sand where we'd lie breathing hard, coughing, until Philip got up and said, "Come on." And back we'd go.

As I'd relax from a drowsy, theta-wave sleep into a deeper, delta-wave one, the black lid moving over me felt like I was being pulled under at Jones Beach again. I'd fight against it, pushing my way up, out of the blankets and into the night air. I'd switch on the light, still feeling the closeness of having narrowly escaped some sort of drowning and that, in turn, would leave me feeling that my brothers had just been with me. For what are memories but the unique connections—the sights, the sounds, the smells we experience with one another—that remain after the day-to-day moments that made up our lives have been forgotten? The limb may be gone but the sensation of it being there isn't. So I'd often wake up missing my brothers. Both brothers.

And then I'd remember.

LESSON THREE WAS A DISASTER. One thing about my swimming technique, I was consistent: every third breath I took in air *and* a mouthful of water, which made me gag.

"Again?" Alex shouted down to me.

Yes, Alex. She was back. Alex couldn't accept that somehow water was finding its way into my lungs. Each time it happened, I tried to hold out so that no one else could see, but it was no good. I ended up stopping three-quarters of the way to the pool's far end, sputtering and coughing my lungs out.

"*Again*?" Alex asked, shaking her head in disbelief. She looked like she was going to stomp her foot.

I tried concentrating more on the breath itself. Supposedly it was all about finding your own natural rhythm, at least that was what Michael had told me last week. So there I was, starting another lap, trying to relax and ease into my own breathing rhythm, trying not to think that any minute I'd be swallowing deadly chlorine, when I found myself at the other end. I'd made it. Alex shouted down, "How was that?" I nodded my head and she yelled out that it just took time.

Emboldened by my success, I pushed off for a return trip. But this time I only got halfway before I felt water gagging me. I abruptly stopped swimming and came up coughing.

"I don't understand," Alex called down to me. "You *look* okay when you're swimming." In the locker room, dejected, I quickly changed out of my swimsuit and into my sweats. As I headed to my car in the parking lot, the thought hit me that other than Fran, the woman who was still clutching the dumbbell, I was the worst person in the class. At Philip's funeral I hadn't been able to shed a tear because of the anesthetizing cloud I was under, but somehow this night I had to summon all my willpower not to start crying as I drove home. It was bad enough that I was taking the class because I was afraid of water, but then to be so terrible at it was too much. It was as if I'd failed Philip somehow. Philip, who had made me stay on the front lawn with night descending on us until I stopped throwing a ball *like a girl*. Philip would've been so disappointed.

On the drive home I started thinking that maybe this swimming-lesson idea wasn't such a good one. Maybe I was placing myself in harm's way a bit too regularly. Fate is not something to tease, to fool around with. It's no ingénue. Maybe it wasn't in my future or anyone else's in my family to be good swimmers. How many mouthfuls of chlorine can your body take before your lungs end up in a book like Nuland's? Which is all by way of saying, I started to doubt myself.

THIS IS WHAT I THINK about losing someone: *grief* is messy. There are books, some of them famous, that will tell you that the stages of grief can be separated like socks and underwear and T-shirts into neat piles in drawers. Emotions come, sure they do—the anger, the sadness, even the forgiveness—but they don't come stag, and they aren't in marching formation either. Grief shows up whenever it damn well pleases, like the party crasher it is. It makes the most of your worst fears and then it leaves.

Grief is messy and I'd spent the last sixteen years combating it, like some people have a lifelong fight against depression. But grief is different from depression. It can be pinpointed back to that one day when you woke up and suddenly someone whom you'd spoken to all your life wasn't there anymore and never would be again. Grief allows you moments, even months of happiness, but then a holiday will come along and the missing doesn't allow room for the eggnog of high spirits. And it doesn't matter if you're surrounded by people; you want him, or her, whoever it is who's no longer there. As Jeanette Winterson wrote in *Written on the Body*, "This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no one else can fit it. Why would I want them to?"

A good friend once told me that grief is like a piece of heirloom jewelry that we inherit. It reminds us of the love, the arguments, the laughter, the frustration, and ultimately, if we're lucky, the love again. We get up in the morning, we slide the ruby ring on, we begin our day. We manage. We keep busy so we don't notice it on our finger. At night we take it off, put it in an enamel box on top of a cherry wood dresser. It's part of our lives, of who we are now. It'll be there in the morning, waiting for us under the lid.

But wait.

If grief is like a piece of jewelry, isn't the implication that it can be chosen, selected from a battalion of emotions? And if it is a matter of choice, then maybe it stands to reason that we can simply decide not to grieve on any given day, just like we can decide not to put on that inherited ring. How much of my grief was unavoidable and how much was it a decision I made every morning when I awakened? Can grief, as Plutarch wrote to his wife after losing their daughter, "be resisted at the threshold and not allowed within the citadel"?

WHEN I GOT HOME from my awful lesson with Alex, I didn't even take the time to rinse off in the shower—I just went straight to bed. My arms and legs were so heavy with fatigue that the bedcovers felt like they'd gained weight. I was tired from class, but I couldn't go to sleep. Sure I might fall asleep quickly, but I'd only awaken with another jarring lurch, my hands and arms clawing against a black pillow smothering everything. Why bother?

During the height of my insomnia my mind would focus on this: When did Philip give in and go under? When did he surrender? He was less than one hundred fifty yards from shore. Couldn't he see it? The brother who I had revered for leadership, for his ability to get us out of messes, had made, to put it lightly, a bad decision that day in October. Why hadn't he just stayed with the boat and let someone else swim for help? But this spring night as I lay awake, my mind clicked, the tumblers fell into place, and there was this: Was part of my own fears of sleeping and swimming connected to my imagining Philip giving up? Was it the going under that was the real problem? Was it that *I* didn't want to give up control, *I* didn't want to surrender? As much as my mother's love for art or my father's passion for words, Philip's lesson of staying on our front lawn and throwing ball after ball until I got it right

and others like it had molded me. You don't give up. Ever. And yet, Philip had. The question was whether I could live with that and stop wanting it to be otherwise. Whether I could forgive him for making the choice he made. Whether I could forgive him for sacrificing himself for the good of others.

And then I thought of something else.

What if he hadn't been swimming to save everyone else? What if he'd been swimming because he'd thought it was the only way to save *himself*? Was the line between hero and coward that thin? These thoughts were fleeting, however. Homer believed a coward was someone "who lingers behind" on the battlefield, or is idle. My brother was neither. He took action, as ill-fated as it was. His last words to his friends had been, "Don't panic. I'll get help."

Now, lying in bed, I realized how much I'd wanted to blame somebody, *anybody*, even my own brother, for his death. If nothing else, grief is a revengeful child, the first cousin of anger. Somebody must pay. All this time I'd held on to my grief and that thought. As if that would even the score. But it won't. Because after the revengeful thoughts are done, what you're left with is not only the loss, but a crushing sense of remorse.

That night it was warm outside so my bedroom window was open. A breeze came through, lifting the curtain softly, and I could smell the chlorine on my skin. It smelled as clean as fresh laundry. Maybe tomorrow I wouldn't lift up the lid of the enamel box and take out that ring. Maybe I wouldn't think about Philip. Maybe I'd finally accept that in the end, as Eliot said, "Neither fear nor courage saves us." Maybe tomorrow would be different.

THE NEXT WEEK I arrived for swim class, but the Advanced Pike class was still in session. Alex was actually in the pool, the deep end, treading water and calling to a line of five-year-olds to jump one by one into the water and swim for the ladder. "Kiley, do *not* jump on me again," she shouted to a slightly overweight girl with a too-small bathing cap. The girl's forehead was puckered red from the tight latex pressure. "Aim for here," Alex ordered her and reaching out, smacked a spot two feet in front of her in the water.

Two boys in the line started to push each other, faking that they'd throw each other in, and an urge the size of a tidal wave rose up in me to yell at them: Are you insane? This water is over your head. This is not playtime. You could *drown*.

At that moment, Kiley threw herself as hard as she could, arms windmilling. Another child covered her eyes, already knowing what was about to happen. "*Ki*—," screamed Alex, but it was too late. Kiley landed right on top of her. Both of them went under but then just as quickly resurfaced, Kiley clutching Alex's neck, Alex sputtering and, amazingly, laughing. "I told you to aim in front of me," she said, good-naturedly.

"I did," Kiley said, laughing, and all the other kids laughed too.

"If anyone else jumps on me, I'm quitting," said Alex, pushing Kiley toward the ladder.

"You say that every week," the kids yelled.

Up until then I'd thought that Alex was a mediocre teacher, failing to teach us much of anything. But now I realized that *I* just wasn't the type of student who could learn from *her*. I was too wise about the precariousness of standing on the lip of a pool. I knew too much. Those kids, though, didn't know anything. Whatever fear they had prior to jumping in could be washed away by the simple thought that they could nail Alex.

By the third time Alex was plunged under by yet another child landing on top of her, even I started to smile. For that wonderful moment I stopped seeing those kids as running toward disaster and tragedy. I saw them at Jones Beach, offering themselves up for a toss about in the waves. I saw them at the YMCA, jumping with reckless abandon, hitting the cool water over and over again, their shouting echoing and echoing and echoing. And there was Alex, arms extended, ready to catch them.

The citadel was safe, for now. •